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## Soviet Islam: A Threatened Order

One of the many unanswered questions that Andropov's successor will inherit concerns a problem that is never brought up by Soviet leaders but the gravity of which is understood by everyone in the USSR: that of the existence of 47 million Moslems, about 18% of the population of the Soviet Union. People often forget that the USSR is a large Islamic power - the fifth or sixth one in the world - and that there are more Moslems in the Soviet Union than in Egypt and more Turks in Central Asia than in Turkey. It is also the last of the large multinational empires, and the eternal problem of the relations between the dominant ethnic group (the Slavs) - who represent only 52% of the total population - and the nations under (Soviet) domination (all the others) is no better resolved than it was in the Austro-Hungarian Empire or in the Ottoman Empire.

The Moslems of the USSR are undergoing what the demographers call a "demographic explosion," which is in contrast to the stagnation of the Russians and the other Slavs. Between 1970 and 1979, the average population increase of the Moslems in the USSR was 22% and that of the Russians 6.5%. In the year 2000 there will be 66 to 75 million Moslems in the USSR, from 22 to 24% of the total population; a dynamic, young mass of people, who cannot be assimilated, grouped in the area bordering the southern frontiers - the "soft stomach" of the USSR, where the Russians and the other "Europeans" will be reduced to the level of an insignificant minority.

Of course, the disparate growth of the Russians and the Moslems does not in itself threaten the stability of the empire, which shows no sign of an imminent breakdown. Central Asia remains to this day one of the few areas in the Islamic world where there is any order (maintained, one must add, by Russian military and police forces). The natives enjoy a standard of living that is much higher than that of the neighboring Moslem countries and also far pleasanter than that of the Russians (they do not, moreover, ascribe the credit for this to "Big Brother.")

The high Moslem religious hierarchy had been "domesticated" and transformed into a valuable partner (it is true that this was done at the cost of substantial concessions), and the Soviet leaders can count, for the moment, on the loyalty of the native cadres of the nomenklatura. Nevertheless, there are four areas where the "Moslem problem" emerges, in the short term, as potentially worrisome.

It is a well-known fact that the industrial areas of the European part of Russia and of Siberia are beginning to experience a shortage of manpower, while in Central Asia there are hundreds of thousands of young people who are unemployed and living more or less on the margin of Soviet legality, and who to this day obstinately refuse to submit to the urgent abjurations of the authorities to leave their sun-drenched fatherland, where "everything always sorts itself out," for Siberia.

## Unemployed Youth

What can be done? Is it necessary to use force and resort to a huge population transfer in the old Stalinist style, since neither propaganda, nor appeals to patriotism, nor increased salaries have managed to convince the Uzbeks and the Tajiks to go and found kolkhozes in the vast Siberian north? Or how about transferring the industry to the available manpower, into a region very close to hostile China and the turmoil of the Middle East? Two equally dangerous options, which make the Soviet leaders hesitant.

Recruiting by the army presents another problem that is difficult to resolve. The Moslems make up about 25% of young recruits (30% by the end of the century). Up to now, except for some rare exceptions, as far as can be judged, probably because of their weak knowledge of Russian, they have not served in fighting units, but in work battalions (or in units of the Ministry of Interior - meant for repressing turmoil in East Europe or in Russia).

The leaders will have to decide, soon, either to open up the fighting units to Moslem soldiers and officers, at the risk of bringing about what is already called the "yellowing of the Red Army," or to keep a purely Slavic army, which will be heavily reduced because of a shortage of recruits, or to accept the principle of a colonial-type army with Slavic officers commanding "Asian" soldiers. None of the three solutions could be considered satisfactory.

The renaissance of Islam, as a religion and a way of life, that was favored by Brezhnev's pro-Moslem policy, is a dangerous phenomenon because of the classic confusion that exists in all Moslem countries between the spiritual and the national elements and which, according to the leaders, constitutes the major obstacle to ethnic intermixing (mixed marriages between Russians and Moslems are just as rare today as they were just before the revolution), the cultural assimilation of the ethnic minorities by the Russians and the coming of the mythical "homo sovieticus." For the majority of Moslems, including party members, the Russian is not only the descendant of the conquerors, but he is also the Kafir, the unclean infidel.

Finally, there is the rise to power of the new generation of Moslem cadres, aged from 30 to 40, formed after 1953, who do not suffer from the trauma of Stalinist repressions, for whom communism is neither a philosophy nor a socio-economic system, but a way of achieving power (how to reach the level of the nomenklatura and, if possible, get rid of the Russian comrades). This new elite is nationalistic, proud and passionately interested in everything that happens beyond its borders. It is weary of the despairing greyness of official Marxism-Leninism and impatient to take over the reality (and not simply the illusion) of power. No agitprop trick could conceal from them the fact that South Yemen or Somalia are independent and sovereign states, whereas the glorious Boukhara, heir to Tamberlaine's empire, is not.

It was only recently that the Soviets began to realise the potential dangers that Islam could impose on the USSR. The alarm bell was first rung in 1978 and 1979, when the first studies of religious sociology in Central Asia and the Caucasus were published, with revelations of a situation that was as alarming as it was unexpected.

After 60 years of anti-religious efforts, 80% of the ethnic population of Central Asia and the Caucasus said they were still "Moslem," 10 to 15% of them "fanatical" believers and less than 20% atheists\*. Rites and customs of religious origin - circumcision, marriage and religious burial - are practiced by almost all of the population, including those who claim to be atheists but do not want to be excluded from the national community. Finally, they revealed the existence, on the sidelines of the official Moslem hierarchy, of a powerful "parallel Islam," strongly structured, fundamentalist, intransigent and xenophobic, independent, but comparable to the Moslem Brotherhood of the Arab countries and to the Islam revolution in Iran. In 1983, the Soviet press acknowledged for the first time the appearance of a fundamentalist Moslem samizdat.

These unpleasant revelations were followed by others that were just as unexpected: the Afghan resistance fighters are holding their own \*Sixty-five years after the victory of the revolution, in the Turkic languages of Central Asia, the expressions "imansiz" (without religion) and "khudasiz" (atheist) are still synonymous with "swindler" and "imbecile."

against the Soviet Army, which had been thought to be invincible, and the Moslem reservists who had been sent to Kabul in December 1979 turned out to be so unreliable that they had to be brought back home in March 1980. In Iran, the ayatollahs had no trouble liquidating the Tudeh Party, the oldest of the communist parties in the Near East. Finally, beginning in 1980, voices of authority (General Zia Yusif Zade, Azerbaijan's KGB chief, Mohammed-Nazar Gapurov, first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, and others...) were heard denouncing subversion from outside: undoubtedly, fundamentalist Islam appeared to be more redoutable than anyone had believed, and the balance of Brezhnev's philo-Islamic strategy turned out to be negative.

#### Andropov's Mark

The year 1983 was marked by a clear hardening of the Islamic policy. Should it be regarded as the personal mark of Andropov or the result of a decision taken in December 1980? Whatever it was, measures were laid down to accelerate the transplanting (very unpopular) of kolkhoz workers from Central Asia to Siberia and Northern Russia. It is still too early to evaluate how effective these measures - which were at any rate insufficient - in alleviating the manpower problem (the number of Moslems transplanted in this way can be estimated at from 15,000 to 20,000).

The Andropov era was also marked by complete relinquishment of cooperation with the high Moslem hierarchy and especially by

a brutal resumption of anti-religious propaganda. In 1983, forty-nine anti-Moslem works appeared in the USSR, in more than one-half million copies, compared to thirty-seven in 1982 and only about twenty in 1981, and the violence of tone of these so-called "scientific" publications is reminiscent of that of the best years of the Stalinist epoch.

Is there a turn in the USSR's Moslem policy, or is it simply a temporary "reprise?" Andropov's reign was too short and we will have to wait a few months to evaluate the direction that his successor's strategy will take. It is however certain that in addition to the four problems mentioned above, another, even more formidable one, must be added, in order to understand the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism.

This one is already penetrating Central Asia and the Caucasus by way of a thousand different channels: radio broadcasts from Iranian and Arab stations on the Gulf, as well as cassettes, "subversive" publications (mostly of a religious nature) of Afghani mujaheddin (translated into Russian and Uzbek), crossing of borders (mostly Turkmen and Tajik) by Afghani preacher-agitators (fact confirmed in 1983 by the local Soviet press) and finally, above all, contacts that defy control between Soviet Moslems and tens of thousands of foreign Moslem visitors and residents (students, engineers, officers...), not all of whom are convinced communists or admirers of the Soviet Union.



The message conveyed by all these channels can be summed up as follows: modern Islam is more dynamic and better organized than communism; it is able to mobilize the masses, while the communist party in the east is only able to recruit a few intellectuals of bourgeois or aristocratic origin; if Khomeiny's Iran succeeded in humiliating the American "Great Demon," (Chaytan-e bozorg), then we too can hope one day to humiliate and even to rid ourselves of the Russian "Second Demon" (Chaytan-e devvom).

As regards Islamic strategy, Andropov's successor will face a dilemma: to continue Brezhnev's offensive policy, at the risk of incurring repercussions in Central Asia, which is destabilized by the contagious example of the Near East, or to return to the isolation policy favored by Stalin, to lower the iron curtain and shut off the Moslem republics from all contact with the outside world. But can an iron curtain still perform its role in this age of cassettes, and is the Soviet gerontocracy still capable of taking draconian measures? Will it not rather try to do what the American Sovietologists call "floundering through the swamp," contenting itself with half-measures that do not settle anything and which only ward off the final moment of reckoning?

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